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AUTHOR Weissbach, Theodore A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was on the conditions which might affect ratings of task competence: (1) the sex of the person performing the task; (2) the sex-typed appropriateness of the task; and (3) subject attitudes towards traditional sex-roles. The subjects were 64 volunteer students (32 women and 32 men) who listened, in groups of eight, to one of eight taped debates. Of two debate topics, one was considered to be typically masculine. The second topic was assumed to be typically feminine. After listening to the debate, each subject rated each debater for quality on a seven-point scale. Two separate analyses of the debate ratings were performed for the same sex and mixed sex debates. The data were consistent with the prredication that ratings of competence would be dependent upon both the sex of the stimulus person and the topic. The question appears to be not whether or not women's competence is undervalued, but under what conditions and by whom it is rated. (Author/BW)

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The Effect of Sex and Topic upon Judgments of Competence

Theodore A. Weissbach, Nancy Lewis

and Joan Weingast Saperstein

Pomona College

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In a study which has now become known to almost every advocate of equal rights for women, Goldberg (1968) reported that when work was attributed to women rather than men it was judged by women as less persuasive and of poorer quality. Despite the failure of some investigators (e.g., Morris, 1970) to replicate Goldberg's results, which were weak in any case, the findings are so consistent with current ideology that the study has become a touchstone for workers in the field of attitudes related to sex-roles.

But it is not just ideology that makes Goldberg's findings convincing. Almost thirty-five years of sex-stereotype research support the idea that men (and what men do) are more respected and liked than women by both sexes (inter alia: Deaux, 1972; Ellis & Bentler, 1973; Fernberger, 1948; McKee & Sherriffs, 1957; Kitay, 1940; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman & Broverman, 1968).

Even if men are better liked in general for what they (stereotypically) do, they are not always admired or considered competent if they perform tasks which are considered in the purview of women. From the earliest age, children are taught that many behavior domains are appropriate for one sex only (see Hoffman, 1972). And, many people seem to imply that certain abilities to perform behaviors in these sex-specific domains are found predominantly in

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one sex. Women are more able to rear children by dint of both biology and education, for example.

It would then seem appropriate to hypothesize that judgments of competence of task performance would not only reflect the sex of the person engaging in the task but the nature of the task as well. It may be that for many culturally valued behaviors, men will usually be judged more competent. Still, there should be other tasks for which women will be judged as more competent and better suited.

Last, individual differences might be considered, particularly at a time when sex-role attitudes appear to be changing. Persons who have adopted non-traditional sex-role attitudes might be expected to make judgments of competence which were less affected by stereotyped conceptions of the appropriateness of a task to a particular sex.

The focus of this study, then, was on those conditions mentioned above which might affect ratings of competence: the sex of the person performing the task, the sex-typed appropriateness of the task, and the attitude toward traditional sex-roles of the subjects. Two predictions were made: (1) ratings of the competence of stimulus persons in a debate would be dependent upon both the sex of the stimulus person and the topic of the debate, and (2) the tendency to rate competence according to sex-typing would be positively related to endorsement of traditional sex-role attitude statements.

Method

The subjects were 64 volunteer students (32 women and 32 men) recruited in the dining halls of the Claremont Colleges.

Subjects listened in groups of eight (four men and four women) to one of eight taped debates. There were two debate topics. The first topic, no-fault auto insurance, was assumed to be an issue which would be considered

typically masculine. The second topic, child-care in day centers, was assumed to be typically feminine. These assumptions were in part experimenter intuition, and in part the result of an informal check to determine if our assumptions were correct. For each topic, the same debate was taped four times: twice each with two male and two female debators counterbalancing for position; then once with a female debater taking the affirmative and a male the negative, and once with a male affirmative and female negative.

After listening to the debate, which lasted ten minutes, each subject rated each debater for quality on seven seven-point scales (e.g., logic, conciseness, expertise). Following the rating, subjects were administered the Spence and Helmreich (1972) Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) and then debriefed.

Results

Two separate analyses of the debate ratings were performed for the same sex and mixed sex debates. The same sex debates were used primarily to test that the two sides of the debate (and the debaters) were equal in strength. The mean differences between quality ratings of the debaters ranged from 0 to 3.75 in the four same sex debate conditions. (Each debater could receive a total quality rating ranging from 7 to 49). Six of eight mean differences favored the affirmative debater, but none of the eight mean differences was significant.

A 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance--topic (child-care or auto insurance) by order (male or female affirmative) by sex of subject--was performed for the four mixed sex debates. The data were difference scores obtained by subtracting each subject's male quality rating from his/her female quality rating. Thus, a positive score indicated that the female debater was rated higher, a negative score indicated that the male debater was rated higher.

The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in Table 1.

The significant topic effect meant that males were rated more competent in the auto insurance debate, females more competent in the child care debate. The topic by sex interaction (see Figure 1) indicated that both males and females rated men more competent in the auto insurance debate and females more competent in the child care debate, but that women's ratings were more extreme in both cases. Another way to say this is that when women saw a difference in the quality of the two debaters, they saw a bigger difference than men, regardless of the sex of the "better" debater.

The difference scores were then correlated with the AWS scores to determine whether quality ratings (favoring females in the child care debate or males in the auto insurance debate) were related to sex-role attitudes as measured by the AWS. The correlation was not significant ($r = .26$, $df = 30$, $p > .10$). The mean AWS score for female subjects = 140, for males = 123. These means are much higher than the norms reported by Spence and Helmreich (1972) who reported a mean for 713 males of 89.26, and for 768 females of 98.21.

Discussion

The data were consistent with our first prediction that ratings of competence would be dependent upon both the sex of the stimulus person and the topic. These findings contradict Goldberg's (1968) conclusion that men are perceived as generally more competent than women. Instead, the findings appear to be consistent with the 35 years of sex stereotype studies which report that there are separate sets of traits appropriate to and typical of females and males. It seems both logically and psychologically consistent to believe that if a person has a certain set of traits (e.g., gentle, warm, empathic), that she/he will be more competent

in tasks (e.g., child care) which require behaviors or knowledge that those traits imply. Given that a person accepts the traditional or stereotypical abilities attributed to the sexes, judgments of competence should depend upon the domain of the task as well as the sex of the person performing the task.

But, what if the person does not accept the traditional notions of what is appropriate to each sex? Subjects in this study did not appear to endorse the traditional view of women's role in society, at least as measured by the AWS. Yet, their behavior in judging the quality of the debaters was not different from what we would have predicted for subjects who would endorse the traditional view. It seemed as if there was no relation between attitudes and behaviors in this study.

At least three explanations for the lack of apparent correspondence between attitudes and behavior are possible. First, the range of scores for the AWS was narrow and may have attenuated the correlation between attitudes and judgments of competence. Second, the narrow range and very high scores on the AWS may have reflected our failure to separate adequately the administration of the AWS from the debate instead of reflecting the "real" attitudes of our subjects. All subjects took the AWS immediately following the debate which probably aroused greater than usual evaluation apprehension and heightened the demand characteristics of the situation.

A third possibility is that this study is just another demonstration that attitudes and behaviors are often inconsistent. When such inconsistency is found, it is usually because the situation in which the behavior is elicited has such powerful norms for behavior that they override individual differences. That does not seem to be the case in this study. If the same demand characteristics which we believe operated to raise AWS scores were

operating on behavior, then we would expect to find that ratings of debater quality would favor women for both debate topics. Rather than demand characteristics or situational norms, we believe that our subjects were making their judgments based upon reality as it exists. Even if a person strongly endorses a non-traditional role for women, he/she might still expect that most people's behavior can still be predicted best by taking into account traditional role expectations. One might wish it otherwise, but it is probably unrealistic at present to expect equal competence from men and women across all areas.

We have no explanation for the finding that women judge the differences between debaters to be greater in the mixed sex conditions regardless of whether it is the male or the female debater who is judged more competent. These more extreme differences were not observed in the same sex debates. The first author found women as compared to men to rate differences larger in one other study (Yelich and Weissbach, in preparation), but it is not yet clear that anything other than chance or artifact is operating.

In summary, we believe that the question is not whether or not women's competence is undervalued, but under what conditions and, perhaps, by whom. Further study is planned to investigate whether or not judgments of competence may be further affected if the judge is held responsible for his/her judgments (as might be the case under conditions of affirmative action).

TABLE I

Analysis of Variance for Mixed Sex Conditions

Source	df	Sum of Squares	F
Topic (T)	1	2244.50	62.13**
Order (O)	1	84.50	2.34
Sex of S (S)	1	2.00	.03
T x O	1	36.13	.50
T x S	1	210.13	3.47*
O x S	1	66.13	1.09
T x O x S	1	60.50	.83
Residual	24	1740.98	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

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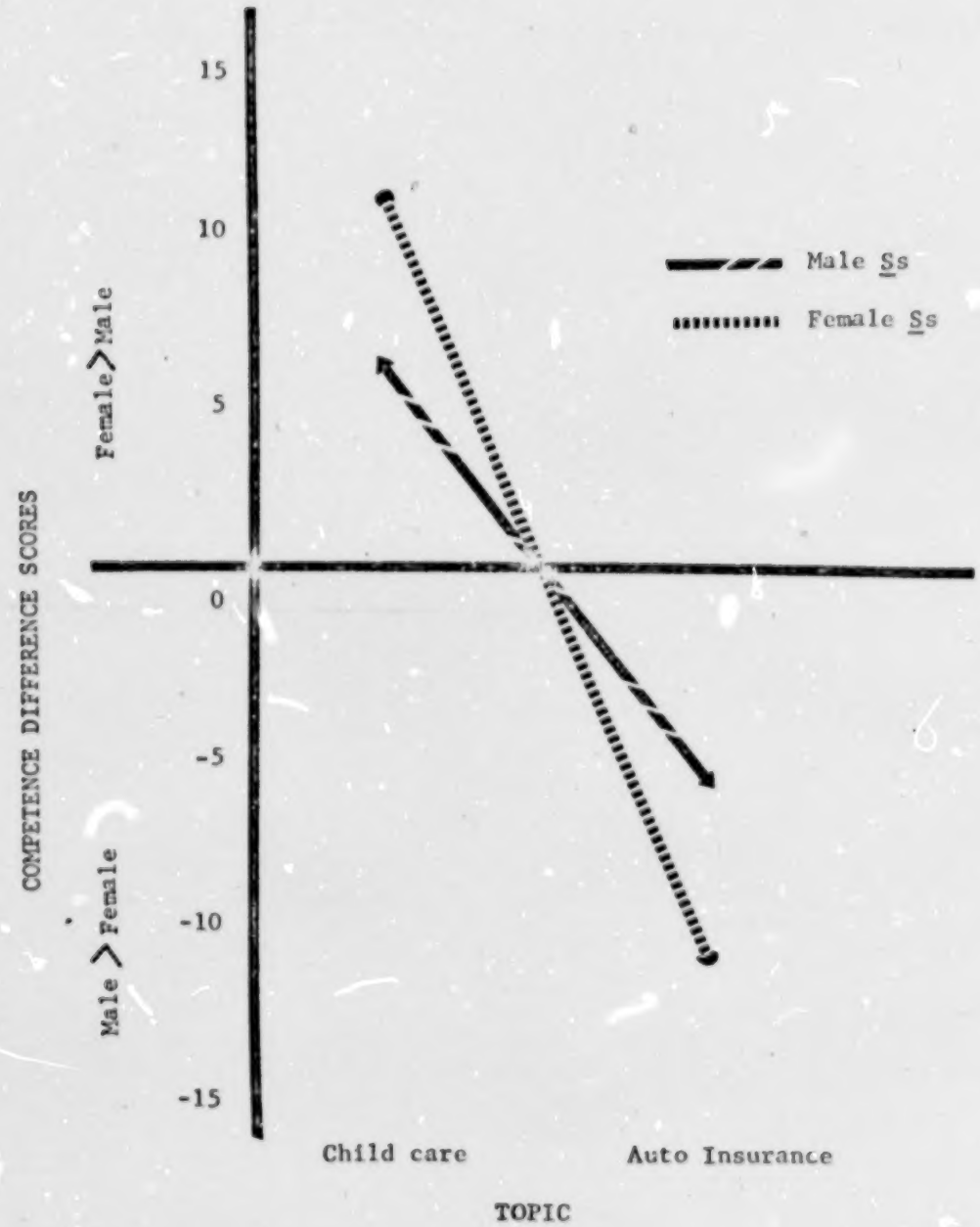

Figure 1. Mean difference scores for Topic X Sex of subject interaction.